

RACY SEXY – AN UTOPIAN COLLABORATION?

–Karin Lee and Henry Tsang

Was *Racy Sexy* a sex show, a showcase for artists of colour and the sexually marginalized, or an act of resistance against mainstream arts organizations? Perhaps it was all of the above, perhaps not. However, as instigators of *Racy Sexy* we saw the exhibition series as an experiment in creative collaboration, a lesson in “community building.” We embarked on a journey to find a safe space where cultural difference would be both celebrated and critiqued. But where was this “utopia” and how would we find the right way through the socio-cultural maze that stood before us? We tried many strategies, some which brought us closer to the heart of the maze and others which failed miserably, leading us astray. Along each step of the way we met individuals who shared our goals, some who took on leadership roles, others who gently suggested other directions. It was this culturally diverse group who collaboratively organized and curated *Racy Sexy*, an inclusive presentation of contemporary art and performance which addressed the intersections of race, culture and sexuality in public “community venues.”

Racy Sexy came about as a result of analyzing the limitations of *Self Not Whole*, an exhibition of contemporary art presented at the Chinese Cultural Centre (C.C.C.) in 1991. *Self Not Whole* questioned popular notions of Chineseness in North America and specifically in Vancouver. Central to the theme of *Self Not Whole* was the definition of community: what constituted the Chinese-Canadian community and who represented and identified with it in Vancouver.

Self Not Whole stirred up memories of the late seventies when the Chinese community was politically divided and there was an urgency to mend differences. The dream of the 1970s was to build a cultural centre for the Chinese community. Many voices claiming to represent the community competed in soliciting funding from all three levels of government. There were, however, conditions from the funders: to create unity and stability

Chinese Cultural Centre of Vancouver



within the Chinese-Canadian community. Thus the community leaders weeded out dissenters and stressed uniformity – to speak with a single voice to governments who for the first time in history acknowledged the right of Chinese-Canadians to build a permanent cultural space.

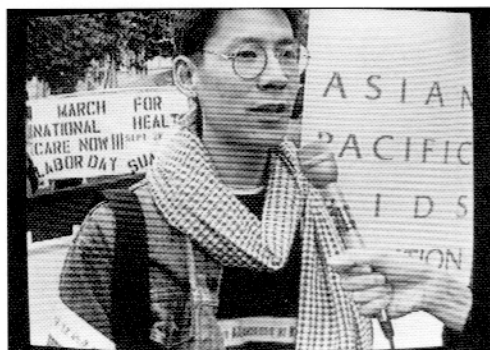
Self Not Whole swam against the tide of Chinese-Canadian uniformity by highlighting differences from within, breaking with the rank and file, and complicating the notion of a homogeneous “Chinese” culture and identity. This approach was hardly surprising, since the curators (Henry Tsang and Lorraine Chan) and participants of *Self Not Whole* viewed themselves as working from the margins of such a community. The artwork did not always praise Chinese culture nor did it document the homeland; it examined what the Chinese-Canadian community had previously promoted as “Chinese.” In *Self Not Whole*, the artists used western avant-garde forms to explore individual identity which challenged the accepted standards of “authentic” Chinese art and thereby appeared to undermine the foundations of community homogeneity that the C.C.C. had been trying to build.

With *Self Not Whole*, the C.C.C. consciously allowed a shift from homogeneity to diversity from within, expanding their definition of community. It was an important development in the C.C.C.’s image and programming as a so-called “neutral” community organization, to allow such youth from the margins to “speak their minds.” After the completion of *Self Not Whole*, we wondered if there were other artists and cultural workers who had experienced the same problems in their respective communities. We thought that an artistic project aimed at sharing experiences with other culturally defined communities would be the next logical step from *Self Not Whole* and brainstormed for a theme that would cross a plurality of cultures.

To cut across the boundaries of race and culture, we looked for a universal human emotion: desire. We were interested in questioning the construction of desire in a North American context. What are our ideas of beauty and how are we influenced by media images? With whom do we identify and why? How and why does our desire differ from others? Were experiences common in different communities, and with those of different

Richmond Cultural Centre, Richmond





Richard Fung
Fighting Chance, 1990
 Video, 31 min.

cultural, class and sexual backgrounds? Finally, how did culture and race influence our sexuality, and vice versa? So *Racy Sexy* moved away from the ethno-specific theme presented in *Self Not Whole* towards a broader vision proposing to bring together individuals to share a cultural space and to build bridges of experience among communities without centering on any particular one.

Racy Sexy sought to fulfill two goals: firstly, to reposition the C.C.C. within a larger framework – in an expanded community of communities – by working in collaboration with individuals from other cultural communities; and secondly, like the barefoot doctors of Communist China in the 1950s taking medicine to the countryside, we were determined to bring art to the people. We were interested in communicating with audiences that had experienced questions around desire, but would not have normally attended art events. Following the success of *Self Not Whole*, which spoke to and reached a large Chinese-Canadian audience because of its placement at the centre, we wanted to expand upon this formula. *Racy Sexy* would move away from art sanctums such as the Vancouver Art Gallery, artist-run centres or traditional theatre spaces, and take place in community and cultural centres across greater Vancouver. Achieving these simple goals turned out to be considerably more complex than we first envisioned.

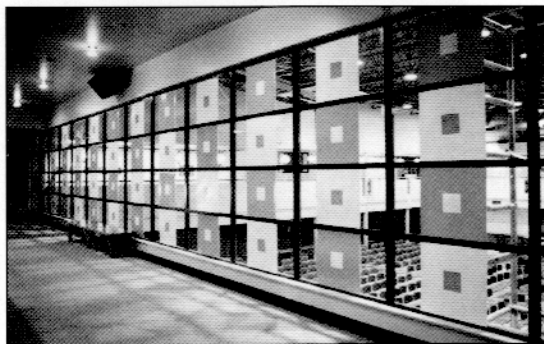
The C.C.C. Board of Directors and regular staff were initially suspicious of both the project and the prospect of outsiders whose opinions and ideas were foreign and therefore uncontrollable. However, the C.C.C. Youth Committee for the Arts (renamed and passed as a sub-committee of the Board of Directors) found support from the Activities Chair Larry Chu, Vice-Chair William Yee and later, Activities Chair Ambrose Hsiung, who argued that such a sub-committee would access “young people,” whom they realized were becoming less engaged with C.C.C. programming. The multi-cultural component appealed to them, and many board members agreed that the C.C.C. could take a leadership role among Vancouver’s cultural centres and, as long as the work was “tasteful and educational,” *Racy Sexy*

was given the go-ahead. It was a great leap of faith by the Board of Directors and it was a new experiment for them, as it was for us. Although Karin Lee also became a Director on the Board, and the responsibility for keeping the C.C.C. in a positive light fell upon her shoulders, the project surprisingly retained an arms-length relationship with the C.C.C. and the subsequent newly elected Board of Directors in 1993.

With the challenge of establishing strong support from within the C.C.C. ranks resolved for the moment, we moved towards another complex problem – creating a structure and process which would reflect this idea of collaboration across racial, sexual and cultural communities. It was absolutely necessary to collaborate with individuals whose different experiences and perspectives would determine the nature of the project. If we were to speak about sharing, then the planning structure would ideally reflect that, which meant sharing power. This was perhaps the most difficult and painful lesson to learn as there was no handbook to reference, only abstract ideals on which we based this loose structure we named “collaboration.”

Our initial research on the project with Cynthia Low and Gita Saxena indicated that our outreach attempts to locate artists investigating the intersection of race, culture and sexuality were ineffective. Perhaps it was because work exploring these intersecting themes was rare, but more likely it was because we needed to expand our network of people engaged in these issues. The project needed the involvement of those who could speak from and about other experiences to locate artists working within the themes, and to negotiate with other communities in opening their “community and cultural spaces.” So both a steering committee and a curatorial committee were formed.

The steering committee was composed of artists, organizers and activists from different cultural backgrounds and sexual orientations. We began with the hope that all members would take on shared responsibility in the collective decision-making process. But to work jointly on an inclusive and therefore large artistic production meant that bonds of trust among committee members needed to be established. Time and money also became a factor.



*Eric Bontogon
Delicious, 1993
Silkscreened posters in multiple sites
around Vancouver*

We needed time to learn about each other, to understand each other, to trust each other. Many of the committee members were artists and activists, and several had differing ideologies. Therefore, negotiating the direction of the project demanded much time and action, but provided very little financial remuneration in return.

As the project proceeded, we realized that decisions were often deferred to allow for broader consensus, and that many on the committee shied away from defining a clear direction for fear of accusations of power-mongering. As instigators of the project, we consciously tried to de-centre ourselves, but found this was more difficult in reality than it was in principle. At times much of the workload was absorbed by a few members, other times by everyone. As a steering committee, we were making progress, but we had not fully bonded and trust was still being tentatively formed among some individual members. After eighteen months of trying to work collaboratively it became obvious that we had failed to reach our initial goals within a prescribed timeline. It was at this time that the C.C.C. Board intervened. They warned us to move the project forward or cancel it.

Even though there was much discord on the committee level, and we stumbled through the process of collective decision-making, there was still a strong sense of commitment and purpose to the project. Abandoning the ideal that the project would attain all of its goals to be inclusive and representative on all levels of staffing and programming, we worked furiously towards the required deadlines. Artists were confirmed, community venues prepared to host the work, and a hardworking staff struggled to keep up with the many demands of the committees. As for some of us on the committee level, we needed to and attempted to shed our egos, to run with the wind, to feel free to be swept up in the events and the works of the artists in *Racy Sexy*.

For us there are images of the event which linger in our memory. The thrill of seeing MP Svend Robinson attend the opening. Chinese boy scouts

milling around Nhan Duc Nguyen and Brice Canyon's triptych, regulars at the Carnegie Centre shouting "bravo!" after the performances of Sheila James' *Sex Straight Up* and david odhiambo's *Afrocentric*. An audience member asking why Wayne Yung painted his body with soya sauce. The strong spiritual energy at the C.C.C. after the screening of Dionne Brand's film, *Long Time Comin'*.

Racy Sexy affected us all in different ways. For us as instigators of the project, it epitomized the risks in building trust between those in different communities, and the need to take more chances like this. Our commitment towards the idea of "utopia," of a safe space where cultural difference is accepted and respected, remains firmer than ever, even if we did learn that collaborations are no simple task. Community building doesn't happen in a day, and it requires constant hard work with others who share similar goals. For a short but significant time, *Racy Sexy* found a temporary space in a complex maze where cultural difference could be shared and where a fleeting glimpse into an idealized future took place.

I do not show affection in public, so you twirl your
tongue against my ear. Delicious. Labelling me
a *forbidden fruit*. Growing in large clusters.
You know, the strange part is,
I get less racial slurs with C.
than when you and I are together.
Yellow on the outside, white on the inside.
Easy to peel, easy to slip on.

Eric Bontogon
Delicious (detail), 1993
*Silkscreened posters in multiple sites
around Vancouver*



Racy Sexy

FILM

PERFORMANCE

VIDEO

VISUAL ART

WRITING

RACE • CULTURE • SEXUALITY

RACY SEXY COMMITTEES

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Karin Lee
Cynthia Low
Zara Suleman
Viola Thomas
Henry Tsang

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Celeste Insell
Cynthia Low
Zara Suleman

Visual Arts

Persimmon Blackbridge
Henry Tsang

Film & Video

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Note: Two families of fonts were used in this catalogue – Gill Sans for commissioned writings and Bembo for excerpts from readings originally presented during the Racy Sexy series.

Photos on title pages from left to right are: Trout Lake Community Centre, West End Community Centre and Sunset Community Centre.

Photos on front cover are works by Jennifer Abbott and David Odhiambo, Terence Anthony, Eric Bontogon, Dionne Brand, Kwoi Gin, and Nhan Nguyen. Back cover photo is an adaptation of Sur Mehat's piece.

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